ALL THAT USEFUL BEAUTY
How Hem found a magical muse, and the sound of a siren

by Peter Blackstock

It's so succinct and sweet that it goes by in the blink of an eye, the title track of Hem's new disc, *Eveningland*. Clocking in at one minute and one second, it begins with the lonesome drone of a clarinet, presently joined by a bed of soft, swirling strings, steadily swelling into a full swoon in a matter of moments before coming to a close with a dramatic pause and the final, fading plucks of a harp's strings. It is, in a single, definitive word, beautiful.

And though it's not entirely representative of Hem's music as a whole — generally they play more traditional three-minute pop songs with evocative lyrics set to the melodies of pianos and guitars — "Eveningland" keenly captures the essence of what is magical about this Brooklyn band's music, and why they have been so passionate about creating it.

Theirs is, in some respects, a lost art. Adrift amid a pop world obsessed with image and message, ego and style, Hem's aesthetic aims squarely for the heart. It's mainly a mood they wish to invoke — the enveloping echo of a cherished childhood memory, the sensory lure of a picture-perfect landscape, the lingering ache of a long-lost love.

Certainly they're not alone in choosing such a path, but few have followed it as deeply into the music as Hem, or created art with such intimate emotional resonance. The blueprint was established on their debut disc *Rabbit Songs*, which was essentially released four times over the course of four years — first as a very limited DIY project in 2000, then in 2001 on U.K. label Setanta, next in 2002 in the U.S. on indie label Bar/None, and finally in 2003 at the big-league level on DreamWorks.

The band was recording its second album for DreamWorks when the label was sold and closed in January 2004. Things eventually worked out relatively well for Hem; they got the rights back and issued *Eveningland* on October 5 on their own Waveland label with distribution through Rounder Records. If *Rabbit Songs* suggested Hem was one of the most promising new acts of the decade, then *Eveningland*, quite simply, delivers on that promise.

How they got to this point is a rather intriguing tale of unfulfilled aspirations, grand visions, and simple twists of fate.

At the center of Hem's story is pianist and primary songwriter Dan Messé (pronounced Meh-SAY), a native of Michigan who moved to Brooklyn in 1991 and spent much of the '90s as a work-for-hire instrumentalist and composer, doing "music for industrial films and multimedia music and theater music," he explains.

Messé also had a band on the side, Big Iron Skillet, which played "sort of uptempo funky country music," he says. A development deal with Sony resulted in an indie EP that Messé basically disowns now.

"It was just a terrible experience," he laments. "I had no creative control. There was a song called 'Caroline', and there was a lyric I'd written that was: 'The pond out by the Pontiac/I'd drink it dry if it'd bring you back.' And the producer would scream at me that I couldn't use the words pond and Pontiac in a song, because no one in America knew what that was. I had to say 'The car out by the lake.'

"I was like, 'What are you talking about?' And he was like, 'You can't be specific.' They were all about being general. No specifics — nothing that could distinguish your voice from anyone, any other songwriters. It was just a really negative experience.

"I started *Rabbit Songs* as sort of a reaction against that. I just wanted to do something that I had total control over, and that could be as uncool as I wanted. I wanted to write these songs like 'Horsey' and 'Lazy Eye'; there was no irony — nothing but just really sweet, heartfelt music."

It's telling that he refers to the project as *Rabbit Songs*, rather than Hem. Messé actually named the record before there was a band name, or even a band — which is just one of many instances in which the development of Hem proceeded almost diametrically opposite to the way contemporary pop bands usually take shape. Consider the following:

• Most bands play many months of live shows before they approach the studio. Hem spent many months in the studio before playing its first live show.

• Most bands begin with a DIY recording that involves cutting corners to keep costs as low as possible. *Rabbit Songs*, Hem's DIY debut, began with a $5,000 budget, but the band kept adding layers of instrumentation until the final cost was about $80,000. ("We sold our equipment, we sold whatever we could" to pay for the album Messé says.)

• Most bands begin building their sound with a singer, and add a producer only when they begin recording. The first person Messé teamed with was producer/engineer Gary Maurer (who also plays guitar and mandolin); the final recruit was singer Sally Ellyson, who was added just a few weeks before *Rabbit Songs* was made.

Ellyson's entry into the band is worthy of further discussion, for it was undoubtedly the most destiny-defined chapter of Hem's complicated history. On both *Rabbit Songs* and *Eveningland*, the most immediately distinctive stamp to the sound is Ellyson's voice, an utterly enchanting instrument that seems an absolutely perfect match for Messé's melodic material. Yet it very nearly was never there at all.

"My original idea was that we'd have a different singer for every song," Messe reveals. "We had talked to all sorts of different singers, to see who wanted to do what.…But as soon as I heard Sally singing 'Half Acre', it was like everything clicked."

That he even had the opportunity to hear her was pure dumb luck. In early 1999, plans were coalescing for Messé, Maurer and guitarist Steve Curtis (an old college pal of Messé) to record *Rabbit Songs*. They still had no vocalist, so Messe placed an ad in the *Village Voice*. The two-line blurb in the "Public Notice: Music" section of the *Voice*

classifieds on April 6, 1999, read, simply: “Female singer wanted for alt folk country record.”

What followed was an arduous process of weeding through countless submissions that weren’t anywhere near what Messe had in mind; he soon gave up and pulled the ad. But not before it had been spotted by Ellyson, a complete novice who had no previous performing experience yet possessed a natural vocal gift.

“I had an old boyfriend who just really kept bugging me to sing,” Ellyson recalls. “I had noticed that there were music want-ads in the *Village Voice*. And I always sort of wanted to sing, but I guess I needed that encouragement — just something that simple as one person to really kind of get at me for it.”

Ellyson contacted Messé, who had given up on finding a singer through the ad. Perhaps just to be polite, he offered to have her come by and sing to his piano accompaniment, but Ellyson was intimidated by that prospect. She did, however, have a tape of lullabies, largely rendered a cappella, that she’d made for a few friends who had recently given birth to children.

Ellyson had no way of knowing, but those lullabies tapped into an aesthetic that almost mirrored Messé’s vision for *Rabbit Songs*. (Indeed, they ended up using a half-minute selection taken directly from the tape, “Lord, Blow The Moon Out Please”, as the album’s opening track.)

Mostly the lullabies were tunes Ellyson remembered from her youth. “Some of the songs my mother said she learned at camp,” she says. “They would all go into their tents, and there was a lake, and the counselors would sing all these old songs, and it would carry over the lake to all the tents.

“And these songs were just, just…” Ellyson is stopped short, caught up trying to convey the emotion, “…beautiful. Mesmerizing. They make you feel like you are in a magical warm place. They just bring you to where you feel like you have a beautiful moon, under a beautiful sort of picturesque starry sky. They evoke a sort of nursery-rhyme landscape. It was very comforting, to me.”

As fate would have it, this was all she could offer to Messé as evidence of her singing style. “I still had one tape left, and I said, ‘Look, I’ll lend you this tape, you can give it back to me.’ He was like, ‘Actually, I’d prefer a dub.’ So I said, ‘All right, let me just run over to your house and make a dub in your tape deck,’ because I didn’t have any way of doing that.

“So, basically, I heard later, he didn’t even have any intention of listening to that tape. He had pulled the ad like weeks before, and he was just trying to get me out of his hair. But because I had made a dub in his tape deck, he accidentally pushed play on the wrong side, and he was like, ‘What’s this?’”

The impact on Messé was immediate and indelible. “Imagine being a painter, and you open up a tube of paint that has this amazing color in it that you’ve never seen before,” he says. “And all of a sudden you could paint these pictures that you had never imagined.”

Yet Messé admits he wasn’t quite sure at first if Ellyson’s voice would

work with his songs. “Even though that tape was life-changing, and just so magical, I still wasn’t sure it was the right voice for us,” he recalls. “I called her up and I was like, ‘This is the most incredible voice I’ve ever heard, but I’m not sure if it’s right for us.’ If you can believe I said that.”

Any lingering doubts were put to rest when they had their first session to record the initial *Rabbit Songs* cuts. “That first weekend we went in to make this stuff,” he remembers, “I think we recorded ‘When I Was Drinking’ and ‘Half Acre’; we had a little string trio for ‘Half Acre’. And, that was the moment. When we were playing through ‘Half Acre’ and we heard the sound, it just clicked. It was like, wait a minute, we could actually do this. It could actually sound just like we’ve always thought it was going to sound.”

Another integral part of this revelation, it’s worth noting, was the expertise of Maurer, who brought a level of studio savvy and expertise that few bands are fortunate enough to have right in their midst. Maurer spent the ’90s making a living as an engineer, working on high-profile albums by Fountains Of Wayne, Luna and other alternative-pop bands as well as producing projects for several lesser-known acts.

The initial idea for *Rabbit Songs*, Messé explains, “came out of many late-night conversations with Gary. He was producing lots of wonderful acts, but it wasn’t really part of him. We both shared the same sort of musical interests, in terms of, like, classic country, and the history of American music. And we kept talking about this album that we would do someday.”

Guitarist Steve Curtis, who also plays banjo and mandolin as well as contributing harmony vocals, came aboard shortly thereafter, and in fact had played a part in previous incubating phases of Messe’s vision. “Dan and I were involved in a project in college together,” he says, referring to their late-’80s school days at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. “He had written what was essentially a song cycle; a handful of the songs on both *Rabbit Songs* and *Eveningland* come from that. And he had brought me on as a guitarist and singer for that project.

“It wasn’t until he and Gary met that it became clear we had the means to do what we wanted to with these songs that we’d been working up for a long time. So I was brought back into the mix at that point. Many of the things that we were hoping for over the years really came into focus around Sally’s voice and Gary’s production ideas, and just the interaction between all four of us.”

The improvement was obvious to Curtis. A few years earlier, he recalls, “we actually recorded a whole incarnation of many of these songs with Dan singing lead and me singing harmony behind that,” he says. “And we all agreed that that didn’t work terribly well. Dan would be the first to characterize his voice in all sorts of disparaging ways.”

Indeed, in the course of our interview, Messé refers to his singing as “grotesque” and “like a cross between Kermit The Frog and Lisa Loeb.” Maurer, separately, says simply, “You know, Dan’s not the best singer in the world, he’d be the first to admit it.”

The lone dissenter is Ellyson. “I actually really enjoy Dan’s singing,” she insists. “It’s certainly not a traditionally attractive voice, but I think it’s beautiful. In fact, I would buy the CD if he had sung.”

Messé ultimately suggests a different method of evaluation. "The problem is that it's too emotional when I sing it," he explains. "With Sally, there's a step removed from it. She approaches these dark lyrics the way a child would; there's this innocence about it. And, as a result, there's room, emotionally, for someone listening to come in. Whereas I think if I'm doing it, all overblown and wearing my heart on my sleeve, it's just sordid, you know?"

And yet…seeing Hem perform onstage is to realize that it's impossible for Messé to disconnect from his passion for the music. Seated at the piano to Ellyson's right, with no microphone in front of him, Messé mouths along the words that she sings, the words that he wrote, with such obvious investment of emotion that it becomes clear: He couldn't NOT sing even if he tried.

"He can't. He honestly can't, you're absolutely right," Ellyson agrees. "He's so in his own world, absolutely. If I was in the audience, that's who I'd be watching the whole time."

Hem finished recording *Rabbit Songs* in 1999 and initially issued it independently in 2000. "I think we printed up like maybe 500 or 1,000 copies," Messé recalls. "We were just handing them out to friends, and it was sort of circulating around."

A turning point came when they finally decided to play their first show, shortly after they had christened themselves Hem (which was the original title of the *Rabbit Songs* track "Lazy Eye"). They booked a gig at the Manhattan nightclub Fez, "and there was like a line around the block," Messé recalls. "That was the first moment we realized, wait a minute, people are actually listening to this."

The transition to performing also necessitated some decisions as to the band's lineup — specifically, who was actually in the band? The *Rabbit Songs* credits listed four core members — Ellyson, Curtis, Maurer and Messe — as well as four apparently auxiliary participants (drummer Mark Brotter, bassist Catherine Popper, violinist Ronit Kirchman, and backing vocalist Sarah Faulkner). The full credits, meanwhile, included nineteen other musicians, playing everything from viola to cello to clarinet to french horn to glockenspiel.

An extended crew of eight eventually settled into place, with the four principals supported by Brotter, Popper, violinist Heather Zimmerman and pedal steel guitarist Bob Hoffnar. Shows in the New York area usually feature that lineup, though touring incarnations of the band generally have been slightly smaller because of logistical and budget concerns.

One might expect, given the inverted nature of Hem's evolution, that the band might be more at home in the studio than onstage. "I felt that way once; I don't anymore," Maurer says. "One of my favorite things about being a part of Hem is that we really don't ever worry about trying to duplicate onstage what we did in the studio."

The release of *Rabbit Songs* on Setanta in 2001 afforded Hem the opportunity to play some dates in the U.K. and build a following overseas. Next came a licensing deal with New Jersey indie label Bar/None, which issued the disc in mid-2002; that led to attention and airplay from National Public Radio. An EP of covers, *I'm Talking With My Mouth*, followed on Setanta in late 2002; it included a gorgeous

rendition of Bruce Springsteen's "Valentine's Day" and a vastly rearranged version of the Johnny Cash & June Carter Cash duet "Jackson". (They ended up including the latter tune on *Eveningland* as well.)

An outtake from the sessions for the covers disc, an excellent Messé original titled "St. Charlene", is available on a split EP with the Autumn Defense recently released on the indie label Arena Rock. (Both bands contributed three numbers to the six-track disc; the other two Hem cuts are BBC Radio recordings of the *Rabbit Songs* track "Half Acre" and the *Eveningland* tune "Pacific Street".)

The next opportunity knocking at Hem's door came from one of Messé's idols. On a section of Hem's website in which the band members discuss their favorite albums, Messé had cited Rickie Lee Jones' 1979 *Pirates* as a record he'd listened to relentlessly for years and years. It was produced by Lenny Waronker, who had gone on to become one of the most successful and respected executives in the music industry.

Waronker was at DreamWorks Records — he was one of three founding partners of the label, which was a Universal-distributed offshoot of entertainment conglomerate DreamWorks SKG — when he came across *Rabbit Songs* a couple years ago. "An artist friend, E of the Eels, sent it to me, saying, 'I don't usually do this, but you should hear this,'" Waronker recalls. "He was right, it was just great. When you hear something that's that beautiful and that smart, with that kind of instrumentation, which is so unique — it was, for me anyway, a big deal."

For Messé, it was an almost surreal turn of events. "Basically, I never thought that we'd sign with a major," he confesses. "I just didn't imagine that we would ever find a major that would give us what we wanted, in terms of both money and also, more importantly, creative control. But Lenny Waronker has always been a hero of mine, since I was a little kid. I've always wanted to meet him, let alone work with him."

DreamWorks re-released *Rabbit Songs* in July 2003, and Hem began working on *Eveningland*. Their ascendance to the major-label ranks afforded the band some opportunities they could not have previously entertained on their own. Foremost among those was a chance to record with the Slovak National Radio Orchestra in the Slovak Republic capital of Bratislava.

"Greg Calbi, who does our mastering, had just gotten through with a session where they used that orchestra, and he was playing it for us," Messé recalls. "And it just sounded so beautiful; it sounded so much like some of those great string sounds that I loved from the late '60s/ early '70s records. It immediately captured my mind, and I was like, 'This is the sound that I want for *Eveningland*.' So he hooked us up with the liaison over there, and we flew out, and we spent about one sleepless week recording it. That was almost the first thing we did, so basically the whole album we had to build around these string orchestra parts."

The string parts were arranged by Greg Pliska, who also handled many of the arrangements on the first album. The close association with Pliska, who had worked with Messé on projects previous to *Rabbit Songs*, is another major asset for Hem, and another thing that sets the

band apart.

"I think a lot of folk bands or country bands or pop bands would be a little intimidated to work with someone like Greg," Maurer says. "He teaches music theory on a grad-school level, and he's this really learned musician who would intimidate a lot of guitar-strummers like myself. But he's just a music lover, and he wants to be in both worlds as much as possible. He's one of us; when he's in the studio, it's like he's part of the band."

The resplendent impact of Pliska's arranging is at its peak on the *Eveningland* title track, which consists almost entirely of the Slovak ensemble (plus accents of glockenspiel from Messé and cymbals from Brotter). Ironically, though, as Maurer and Messé worked incessantly on assembling the album after the rest of the recording was done, they found themselves confronted with an instrumental embarrassment of riches that threatened to overwhelm the songs.

"We got a little overenamored with all the orchestra that we had to play with," Messé observes in retrospect. "Every part was great, but it was getting in the way of the emotion of the song. It was getting in the way of Sally's voice, or it was just not effective. You'd listen to it and you'd be like, wow, that's beautiful, or wow that's cool — but it would leave me cold.

"So we just went through a process of stripping back, whittling away at a lot of the layers. And slowly the song became more emotionally resonant, and just more effective. And then some songs we just had to re-record from scratch."

In the midst of all this, the bottom fell out of their major-label experience. In January 2004, Universal bought DreamWorks Records and folded it into its Interscope label, dropping much of the roster (including Hem).

Waronker, however, helped ensure Hem's ability to obtain the rights to *Eveningland*, which they eventually decided to release on their own Waveland label with distribution through Rounder. "We looked at other major labels and stuff," Messé says, "but, you know, there isn't another Lenny Waronker out there."

The end result of the band's turbulent ride over the past year is, artistically at least, an unqualified treasure. As auspicious a beginning as *Rabbit Songs* was — Waronker says, simply, "I think it's a classic" — Eveningland is an even better record. The orchestral accents, though reined in, remain majestic; Ellyson's singing expresses a greater range; and the ensemble's playing feels more assured from the experiences they've shared.

Messe's material, meanwhile, is even more melodic and memorable than on *Rabbit Songs*. Compared to the more folkish foundation of that record, *Eveningland* leans more toward classic pop; tracks such as "Lucky", "Receiver", "Redwing" and "Carry Me Home" bring to mind the late '60s/early '70s golden age of AM radio.

To Messé, it's not just the notes, but also the words, that turn a song into magic. "For me, the sound — that sonic, hopefully cinematic world that we create — is based on the lyrics we're writing," he says. "I think my favorite albums are always albums that capture a time and a place. For example, you can listen to Tom Waits' *Swordfishtrombones* and feel

like you're inside an old hotel, or Scott Walker, feeling like you're in Paris in the rain.…It's usually a great image, a great lyric, that I keep coming back to."

Ellyson shares that sense, and feels it keenly in Messé's work. "His music is so descriptive; it evokes such beautiful pictures," she says. That connection was there from the first time she heard Messé at the piano, shortly after he'd serendipitously listened to her lullabies tape.

"We sat down and he started playing these songs, and it was like, it tapped right into all the songs that meant so much to me," Ellyson remembers. "All the old Disney songs that I would listen to when I was a child, and had such an effect on me. I just thought, oh my gosh, these are gorgeous, gorgeous songs."

The Disney reference is, in fact, quite relevant: On its 2001 EP of covers, Hem included the Cinderella chestnut "A Dream Is A Wish Your Heart Makes", which Ellyson had previously recorded on her lullabies tape. "The first record I remember loving when I was young was the Disney *Cinderella* album," she explains. "I'd play it when I'd go to sleep, and it would end up with this big deep dug groove in the middle where it would just spin all night after I had gone to sleep. And that song always meant so much to me. I always thought it was so full of hope."

Messé speaks in a similarly wondrous way about the music of another classic children's movie, *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory*. "That's an amazing soundtrack," he raves. "How could you not love those songs? I mean, just the arrangements — I think if I had to point any finger at where we got the sound for our arrangements on this album, it's that soundtrack. If you listen to 'Fire Thief' [the opening track on Eveningland], the string arrangements are very much based on some of those *Willy Wonka* arrangements."

It's this reverence for the magic that music can cast during childhood, and a desire to rekindle the spell in our adult lives, that is ultimately the passage to the artistic realm Hem seeks to create, and inhabit.

"Part of my interest is always wedding high art to pop art, because to me, that's what American art is all about," Messé concludes. "And so it just seems natural that these songs are basically not even pop songs; they're children's songs, hopefully. And if we can take a children's song and marry it to a band on one end and an orchestra on the other, then you're going to have something pretty deep."

ND *co-editor Peter Blackstock would love to hear Hem cover Jimmy Webb's "Land's End/Asleep On The Wind" someday.*

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